


COMMISSION for SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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Department of
Economic and
Social Affairs



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Fifty-ninth Session of the Commission for Social Development

Ministerial Forum “Promoting multilateralism to realize inclusive, resilient and sustainable recovery from COVID-19 in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development and its social dimensions”

Tuesday, 9 February 2021, 10:00am-12:00pm
(Virtual meeting)

Chair’s Summary

The Commission for Social Development held a Ministerial Forum on 9 February 2021, under the theme of “Promoting multilateralism to realize inclusive, resilient and sustainable recovery from COVID-19 in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development and its social dimensions”. The forum was convened under sub-agenda item 3, moderated by the Chair of the 59th session of the Commission for Social Development, **H.E. Maria del Carmen Squeff** from Argentina. Panelists included **H.E. Daniel Arroyo**, Minister of Social Development of Argentina, **H.E. Ariunzaya Ayush**, Minister of Labour and Social Protection of Mongolia, **H.E. Juliane Seifert**, State Secretary of the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth of Germany and **H.E. Anar Karimov**, Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Protection of Population of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

Ministers shared their national experience in ensuring inclusive, resilient and sustainable recovery from COVID-19. They also discussed how to promote multilateralism to support national efforts to build back better towards achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the decade of action.

Poverty alleviation, social protection and social services

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are falling disproportionately on the most vulnerable, including people living in poverty, the working poor and other vulnerable groups. Poverty projections by the World Bank suggest that the social and economic impacts of the crisis are significant. Estimates show that when compared to pre-crisis forecasts, COVID-19 could push 100 million people into extreme poverty in 2020. Social protection programmes can play a key role to protect those that are most at risk and safeguard the most vulnerable.

To tackle this challenging situation, Argentina supported over 9 million families through cash transfers. Further, the country prioritized food security, providing food assistance to around 11 million people. Other panelists also shared their national efforts to ensure food security. In Mongolia, the food stamp programme was doubled to reach more people in distress. In Azerbaijan, a large number of families received support in the form of food packages. Targeted social assistance for low income populations was a tool used as well in Azerbaijan. Financial support for low income families was likewise increased by Germany during the pandemic. Mongolia doubled the benefits of its social pension.

Several delegations emphasized the importance of tackling child poverty. In Argentina, where the highest levels of poverty are found among children, policies are promoting access to early education to provide the same opportunity to all children. Child benefits in Mongolia were increased five-fold reaching near universal child support. Germany remarked that the closing of schools had negatively affected children and families and stressed the need to prioritize the protection of children worldwide. Policies in Germany during the pandemic ensured that children and youth services remained in operation and provided flexibility for parents during the closure of educational institutions. Germany also launched an information campaign for women experiencing domestic violence to access support services.

In Azerbaijan, social services of persons over 65 years of age included financial assistance for food, medication, and payment of utilities, as well as food assistance. Argentina identified as one of its main priorities the urbanization of neighbourhoods that do not have basic services, such as running water, and the improvement of housing.

Protecting and promoting employment

According to the latest data from the ILO, global labour income in 2020 is estimated to have declined by 8.3 per cent, which accounts for 4.4 per cent of global GDP. Projections suggest that a persistent work deficit will remain in 2021 in the context of a global economy facing high levels of uncertainty. The pervasive impact of COVID-19 on employment was raised by panelists and national interventions. The importance of adopting or strengthening policy tools to protect existing employment and promote the creation of new jobs was highlighted.

In this regard, Argentina has adopted several strategies to rebuild the labour market in the country. One such strategy is providing half the minimum salary to around 800,000 individuals to guarantee a basic income while at the same time incentivizing work. Argentina plans to create more employment opportunities in selected industries, including construction, textile, food production, health care and the recycling industries. They also intend to focus on people in rural areas, including young men and women, and persons with disabilities who have difficulty accessing the labour market. The protection of household livelihoods has also been a priority in Mongolia. A critical law is in place to provide financial support to employers in order to preserve and protect jobs, avoid interruptions in the payment of social contributions, and enable citizens to receive pensions and other benefits. Mongolia plans to improve the quality of life of its citizens within a framework of employment promotion policy. As a result of fiscal measures adopted to stabilize the economy and secure jobs, Germany reports that unemployment in the country did not increase significantly. For instance, by easing the criteria to qualify for short time working allowance,

Germany was able to provide 2 million people with short-term jobs, compared to 200,000 before the crisis.

Azerbaijan targeted public sector employees to prevent unjustified dismissals and layoffs. As a result, 80 per cent of public sector employees were able to secure their job while working remotely. Further, Azerbaijan created 40,000 paid public jobs that do not require higher education and are financed by the State, among other measures. The country also protected private sector employers by supporting employers through recommendations towards adhering to social solidarity, monitoring their work and sending them electronic warnings. These policies protected many workers during the crisis. Around 6 per cent of the population benefited from different social protection benefits during the pandemic.

Harnessing the potential of new technologies

As detailed in the Secretary-General Report to the Fifty-ninth session of the Commission for Social Development, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the pace of digital transformation. While the digital revolution has already brought tremendous benefits to socio-economic development, it also risks widening the digital divide, further exacerbating existing inequalities and polarizing the labour market. On the other hand, where a people-centred approach is taken that maximizes the benefits and minimizes the risks of digital technologies, it can help create a more inclusive, equitable, resilient and sustainable society for all.

Countries such as Mongolia have embraced this vision and report the use of digital technologies in several areas of public policy during the pandemic while stressing the need to accelerate digital transformation. In the education system, Mongolia has been recognized for its e-learning and distance learning system in the region. Vision 2050 of the country envisions a smart and sustainable government and aims to create digital technology and citizen-based services that are transparent, fast and affordable, including through the implementation of e-government initiatives. In this context, Mongolia highlighted the need to improve digital literacy among all citizens.

Azerbaijan noted the need for cohesive digital services to enable easy access to social services for vulnerable groups, particularly persons with disabilities. Similarly, Burundi has launched several initiatives to allow 80 per cent of people living in rural areas, particularly women, to access technologies. They called on the international community to make digital technologies and artificial intelligence broadly available to improve and maintain agricultural outputs and protect people from natural disasters. Malawi highlighted that digital technologies have enabled better social distancing, e.g., through personal banking, especially in rural areas.

The role of multilateralism

The COVID-19 crisis had posed unprecedented challenges to social development and the well-being of people worldwide, exacerbating pre-existing inequalities, deepening poverty, affecting disproportionately the poorest and most vulnerable populations. At the same time, recovery from the COVID-19 crisis provides an opportunity to bring transformative changes to build more inclusive, equitable, resilient and sustainable societies. The need to strengthen international solidarity, multilateral cooperation, and genuine partnerships among all stakeholders were deemed

crucial by several speakers including Argentina, Dominican Republic, Ethiopia, Philippines, Germany, China and Cuba.

As pointed out by Germany, a global pandemic can only be solved globally through multilateral cooperation and international solidarity, and in awareness of the differential impact the pandemic has on countries. Germany brought the regional experience of the European Union, where the largest stimulus financial package in its history has been agreed upon to support those Member States in the Union that were hit the hardest. Germany noted that the European Union is working on the European Pillar of Social Rights which considers minimum wages, gender equality, protection of children with a focus on social justice and lessons learned from the pandemic which could provide a blueprint for other regions on multilateral cooperation to fight inequalities.

China also identified multilateralism and solidarity as the only way out of the crisis and stressed that post-pandemic reconstruction is a national priority. Argentina stressed the importance of exchange at the international level and expressed its support to the Commission for Social Development, highlighting South-South and triangular cooperation as an approach that fulfills this goal and supports ownership among participant countries. Reflecting on how much the world had been unprepared for this crisis, the Philippines has embraced multilateralism and effective partnerships to cope with the crisis. As part of this effort, the Philippines reached out to development planners from neighboring countries and engaged with academia and the business sector. The country expressed gratitude for the work carried out by the World Health Organization. The Philippines also brought the attention of the forum to the important role to be played by the international financial institutions and the real possibility of COVID-19 constituting a set-back to the SDGs unless countries recommit to making multilateralism and international cooperation a priority.

International cooperation for vaccination

China identified vaccines as key to win the fight against COVID-19 and lamented the large gap between the North and the South in terms of the delivery of vaccines, in particular in the case of least developed countries which are yet to receive any vaccines. Cuba supported the Secretary-General's call to equitable access to vaccines and regretted the competition among rich countries for protective equipment and in the development of the vaccine.

Reflecting also on the fact that developing countries have only received a fraction of available vaccines, Germany noted that the EU has pledged 500 million euro to the COVAX programme, with Germany pledging an additional 100 million euro in its national capacity. China has provided 10 million doses of vaccines to COVAX, will continue to contribute to the accessibility and affordability of vaccines, and has provided vaccine assistance to 13 countries, with another 38 to follow. Cuba provided support to other countries during the pandemic with medical personnel from the country deployed overseas and is in the process of developing four different vaccines, with a surplus of doses that could be delivered to other countries. Ethiopia stressed that vaccines should be a global public good that is accessible and affordable to all.